WHEN CHRISTMAS CAME TOO EARLY

MABEL FULLER BLODGETT

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WHEN CHRISTMAS CAME TOO EARLY

IT WAS LUCKY BEN WAS A STRONG BOY FOR HIS AGE.
FRONTISPIECE. *See Page* 56

WHEN CHRISTMAS CAME TOO EARLY

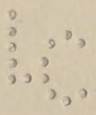
BY

MABEL FULLER BLODGETT

Author of "The Giant's Ruby," etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

RALPH McCLELLAN



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To
Virginia Burrage
and
Dorothy Blodgett
this book is dedicated

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It was lucky Ben was a strong boy for his age . . . . . *Frontispiece*

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WHEN CHRISTMAS CAME TOO EARLY

CHAPTER I

BEN was a boy who always wanted things just a little different from the way they were. If his mother gave him jam for dessert, he would be apt to complain because it hadn't been pie, and when his uncle William presented him with a fine new bicycle, Ben, I am sorry to tell you, began almost at once to say that he wished his

wheel had been painted red instead of blue.

So, of course, you will not be surprised when I add that Ben found a great deal of fault because Christmas did not come earlier. In fact, he grumbled so much about it, and talked in such a silly way, that at last his father lost patience with him and sent him upstairs to bed without any supper.

"I think it's mean," said Ben, as loud as he dared, as he went slowly to his room; "if Christmas came sooner, I shouldn't have so much school, and, besides, there'd be lots more time to use the new skates that I think moth-

BEFORE HE HAD MADE UP HIS MIND THE SHRILL LITTLE VOICE SOUNDED AGAIN. *Page* 3

er 's going to buy me." And he pushed open his chamber door. "I just wish *I* could fix things once," he added, as after swiftly undressing he got into bed.

"Do you?" asked a shrill little voice that made Ben jump, and he looked about the room in amazement. Everything seemed as usual. His white iron four-post bed with the coverlid neatly turned back was quite the same, his dressing-gown folded and lying on the chair just as his mother had left it, his fishing-rod in its place in the corner, the window — But what was that on the window? Ben didn't quite know whether to look again, or to jump up and run downstairs; and before he

had made up his mind, the shrill little voice sounded again, —

" Don't be afraid. I'm a friend of yours, and I think just as you do about Christmas. It certainly ought to be earlier, and I'll help you to make it so, if you like."

Ben could hardly believe his ears. To begin with, people didn't generally agree with him. His mother usually said, " Oh, do run along, you foolish boy! " and his father was very apt to cut short any argument with, " Not another word, my son." It was very pleasant to hear that his idea of the matter had been right, and besides the voice came from such a small figure

perched on the window-ledge; anything so tiny could hardly do him any harm. And if this queer little object really could help him, what fun it would be; and people would find out that some boys knew a great deal more than some grown people.

So, thinking of all these things, Ben sat up straighter and took a better look at his strange visitor.

A queer little person he surely was: not over a foot high, with a brown skin, twinkling brown eyes, and a small, turned-up nose. He was dressed in nut-brown doublet and hose, with cap and shoes of the same color; so when he said abruptly, in answer to the

boy's questioning look, "I'm a Brownie," the name seemed just what it should be.

"Do you live far from here?" asked Ben politely.

"Here and there and everywhere," answered the small creature airily. "I like fun, and I go where I wish to get it. I've just come this morning from the North Pole, and if you mean what you say, you shall go back with me there to-night."

At this Ben's eyes and mouth opened wide with astonishment.

"Oh, you needn't be so surprised," said the Brownie; "I can do my part all right, if you'll stick to yours. And

you needn't worry about your family, either, for I'll leave an imitation boy in your place, and they'll never know the difference. He'll be hollow inside, but your mother said the other day at breakfast that she thought *you* must be, and he'll grumble at most things, about the way you do; and when you come back he'll vanish, and you can step right into his place."

"Well," said Ben, "it sounds pretty good. How do we go?"

"Right straight through without changes, by the new Brownie System. You hold my hand and shut your eyes; I say the word, and there you are."

"But I'd rather go a different way," began Ben; but the Brownie interrupted crossly, —

"That sort of talk may do at home, but it won't do with me. If you want Christmas changed, you've got to see Santa Claus; and if you want him, you've got to go to the North Pole; and if you go to the North Pole, it's got to be my way. Take it or leave it; and be quick too. I can't sit on this window-ledge all night."

"I'll take it," cried Ben hurriedly flinging on his clothes again as he spoke, for he thought it would never do to miss a chance like this; and besides, how envious all the boys at school

would be when he told them of his adventures!

"Right you are," said the Brownie heartily. "Here's my hand. Hold tight now. Shut your eyes. 'Rumple-tibubble — kinfinysco — Hiohi — open your eye! Presto Change!'"

It sounded to Ben like the Home College cheer. He hadn't moved, of course. It was all a joke of the Brownie's, but he opened his eyes obediently, however, and then closed them quickly, only to open them once more. Could he be dreaming? His room had vanished, the very village about it had disappeared. He was standing at the beginning of a long avenue of ever-

greens, each one hung with tiny candles, gold and silver balls, and horns of plenty.

"Why, they're Christmas trees," he said suddenly.

"Of course," answered the Brownie, who was still by his side; "what else did you expect? And that house in the distance, at the end of the drive-way, is Santa Claus' residence. Now

look here; I'm not going in there, because just now we've had a little disagreement. But by and by he'll come out to feed the reindeer for the night, and then you slip in and hide behind something. There's a big calendar in the work-room, and he goes by that. So when he's not looking, you pull off as many leaves as you like, and it will bring Christmas that many days nearer. When he starts Christmas Eve to deliver goods, you can get in the back of the sleigh, and so home again. Good-bye, I've got to go now;" and before the boy could speak the Brownie had vanished.

It was certainly all a very strange

proceeding, and Ben felt very lonesome and just a trifle frightened in the great silence that followed the Brownie's chatter. Above, the glittering stars shone cold and bright, and about him on every side stretched, mile upon mile, the snow; no house save one; no hills; no trees but those before him; no fences; nothing like home; only the snow, — for ever and ever the untrodden, pathless snow.

The most friendly thing in the whole landscape was a beam of light that came from the uncurtained window of the house at the end of the long double row of Christmas trees, and toward this Ben slowly made his way. He had

hardly reached the shelter of the porch when the door opened and a merry round face looked out; then, bearing a lighted lantern in one hand, Santa Claus himself crossed the threshold. Of course Ben knew him at once, as he would have known him anywhere, though he had never seen him except in pictures. He was short and fat and rosy, though not quite so fat and rosy as usual, he had a long white beard, a fur-trimmed suit and cap, and great high boots for walking through the snow.

As he passed Ben, never seeing him, he began to talk in a jolly kind of voice: "Let's see, let's see. There's Donner

and Blitzen to be fed with the special sea-moss, and Cupid's off shoulder must be rubbed well with liniment. All the reindeer must be in good condition, for there's plenty of work ahead. Plenty of work, and that's what I like and they like too, though I wish we had more time;" and with a quiet chuckle Santa Claus disappeared around the corner of the house, while Ben crept quietly within. I don't think the dear old saint would have been so jolly if he had known everything just as we know it, do you? It made it worse that year because Santa Claus was not feeling as strong as usual. The fact is he was just up from

the measles. He had really had a very hard time, for he came down with them and the spots came out all over him just the night of the worst blizzard of the season.

All the wires were down that ran from the top of the North Pole to the various kingdoms that were nearest Christmas Tree Land, and as you must know, it was much too far away for any telephone.

So poor old Santa Claus did everything he could think of for himself, for he simply *had* to get well.

Fancy a Christmas with Santa Claus in bed with the measles! It makes one hot and cold all over to think of it for

a moment, and that was the way, only worse, that it made Santa Claus feel.

He was so worried too about the reindeer, for he knew he must never in the world go out in that raging snow storm to feed them.

Pretty soon they got dreadfully hungry and came up to the door and the windows stamping their feet and making loud and very plaintive reindeer noises to beg Santa Claus to please hurry up with supper. Their master was nearly wild himself, and I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't managed to think of letting down a basket with food in it from an upper window. The basket was at-

tached to a candy box
string,—you know the kind, all
red and gold; it was pretty but not
very strong, so Santa Claus didn't
dare to fill the basket very full,
and it took a long time to satisfy
all those hungry reindeer. He had
to keep opening the window and

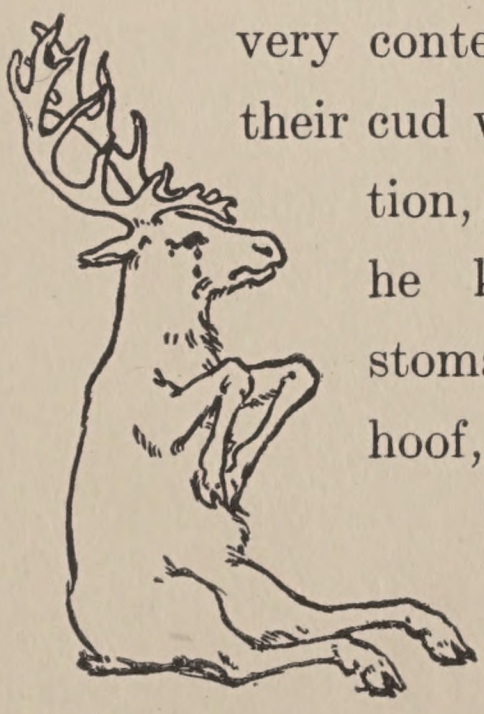
pulling up the empty basket and then lowering it again, and every time he did it a lot of snow blew in.

It really wasn't a bit good for the measles. Santa Claus sneezed dreadfully every time the wind brought the frosty icy particles in through the window, and once something dreadful happened, for a jumping-jack that was dangerously near the sill was blown right out into the basket and Blitzen ate him up before Santa Claus could say " My stars and garters! " which of course he never does say unless he is just too dreadfully surprised for anything.

It wasn't good for the reindeer and

it wasn't good for the jumping-jack, but it was too late to do anything about it, so Santa Claus gave one great big sigh and then softly shut the window down for the last time. You or I might have got mad and banged it, but that wasn't Santa Claus' way.

The reindeer trotted off to the stable very contented and chewing their cud with much satisfaction, all but Blitzen, and he kept rubbing his stomach with his front hoof, but it was really his own fault, for if he hadn't been so greedy he would



have seen the jumping-jack in the reindeer food in time to prevent himself from swallowing it whole. I leave it to you if it isn't greedy for any one to eat as fast and carelessly as that.

Well, the reindeer were all right, for they only want one meal a week; that is, the imported fancy stock that Santa Claus drives are like that; but Santa Claus himself wasn't so well off.

The Great Bear told the Little Bear, who told Orion, who told me that standing so long by that open window nearly finished Santa Claus.

Santa Claus finished! B-r-r-r! The Great Bear dropped several stars right

out of the heavens, he shivered so at the very idea, and Orion took up a notch in his belt and began to get as angry as anything at the poor reindeer, who really couldn't help being hungry. I know I always am when I don't eat anything for a week, and perhaps even greedy Blitzen wasn't so much to blame after all.

Well, to go back to Santa Claus. He wanted to get well like anything and if he'd known, as I have said, the trick that Ben was going to play upon him, I think he would have been just too discouraged for anything. Perhaps it was best after all that he didn't. Anyway he looked up the old family doc-

tor's book and he did everything for himself, and some more too, that it mentioned as being good for illness.

He soaked his feet in mustard and hot water and he put goose oil on his chest and he wound yards and yards of red flannel (left over from last year's dolls' petticoats) around his throat.

Then he took two kinds of pills, a brown kind that tasted dreadfully, just a few of these, and a good many pink pills that were so sweet they seemed very much like candy.

He put on his nightcap and went to bed then, but he just couldn't sleep. He got up once about three o'clock and put some germ-proof paint on a

set of Noah's Ark animals. Santa Claus wouldn't run any risk of giving anybody measles, you may be sure, but then you never saw such funny looking animals. Perhaps you've had a Noah's Ark some Christmas that had pink cats with black spots on them, and blue dogs. Well, they are just the same as the ones Santa Claus did that night.

Anxious as he was he saw pretty soon it was no use trying to work. It was better to toss and turn and count up all the things to be done and read over the letters he'd received, and make plans when he did get better to cut short sleep and meal hours and not

even stop to pat a reindeer till the Christmas toys at least were safe.

Santa Claus made up his mind right then that the children should certainly be taken care of.

When he got well enough to begin work once more, I am told, the first thing he did was to toss away behind his big carpenter's bench a lot of trifles like pearl necklaces and things called coupons that rich grown up people like. He was willing, of course, to take those things in his pack if he had time and room, but the dolls and the toy elephants and the drums and bicycles and such things, the skates and the sleds and the candy canes came first.

That was Santa Claus' way, and I think it a good one. But all the while Ben is waiting and I suppose we had better get back to him. By this time he was safely enough inside Santa Claus' house.

CHAPTER II

To be in such a house in such a way! It was enough to turn a boy's head; and Ben didn't stop to think how much pleasanter it would be to walk up boldly and ask, like a man, for shelter, and enter as a guest, than thus to sneak in like a thief when Santa Claus' back was turned. I would like to be able to say that Ben felt ashamed; but the truth is, he didn't stop to think of anything of the kind, so curious was he to see this wonderful place and the treasures it contained.

Having stepped across the threshold, the boy found himself in a great low-ceilinged room, bright and cheery and warm. Across the centre of the apartment ran a long work-table, with many kinds of tools upon it ready for use. Ben also saw lying there a pipe, and a big brass-bound book, which happened to be open, and which evidently contained the names of children, something about each one, where they lived, and what they were to receive on Christmas Day.

The boy turned back to the front pages and soon found his own name. He had just read "Benjamin Bean: short, strong, light hair, pug nose, blue eyes, freckles. First cottage to the left on Pine Street. Likes to grumble —" when Santa Claus' returning steps sounded without, and he jumped back so quickly, to escape being seen, that he accidentally hit a flaxen-haired young lady doll in the chest, and she said, "Ma! ma!" so loudly that the boy turned cold with fright. However, Santa Claus did not hear her, but stopped to turn the big key in the front door, and Ben had time to crouch behind a big pile of newly made drums,

and so near some freshly painted jumping-jacks that it was all he could do to keep from sneezing.

Much to his relief, however, Santa Claus did not seem disposed to work any longer that evening; for after glancing about to see that all was in order, and carefully knocking the ashes from his pipe, he slowly climbed up a ladder that led to a loft overhead and so through a trap-door, which he shut carefully after him.

Ben could hardly believe his good fortune. He waited for a few moments to make sure that it was safe to come out, and then he crept quietly forth.

Such heaps and heaps of toys! What

should he look at first? But before he decided, he would make sure of the thing he had come so far to do, and going to the big calendar that hung on one side of the wall, he began to tear off the pages with a reckless hand, stopping only at December twenty-third.

Then such a night as followed! No boy could be sleepy in a room like that, and Ben was wide enough awake, I can tell you. He ran a beautifully made engine up and down a line of tracks

and in and out of the engine house, till he was tired; then a full-rigged ship caught his eye; and a marvellous game with marbles; and mounted horsemen who rang tiny bells as they leaped little fences kept him busy for quite an hour. I cannot, in fact, begin to tell you all that Ben found by turns interesting and amusing.

There were many things there, of course, that, being a boy, he passed by without a second glance, — things that would have made a little girl wild with delight: dolls that talked and walked and danced, baby dolls, queen dolls, nurses, Red-Riding-Hoods, and so on with amazing and delightful variety;

doll houses completely furnished; toy cook-stoves with pots, pans, and kettles; necklaces; rings; bracelets; and, of course, a great variety of toys for both girls and boys of younger growth, — Noah's Arks; animals that squeaked and growled; fishes that floated; trumpets; roly-polys; rattles; — it was enough to make your head swim.

Ben saw just the kind of football his soul yearned for, and a bicycle superior to any in the village; and there were kites of curious forms, and self-cocking air-guns and other guns of different styles, so that he felt very much like the donkey between two

bales of hay, and asked himself a dozen times which should he take first.

But even a night like this must have an end, and Santa Claus is an early riser. The morning light began to stream into the uncurtained windows, and Ben reluctantly took off the policeman's helmet which he had just donned, and carefully avoiding the young lady who said "Ma! ma!" sought his hiding-place, having first provided himself with a generous slice of bread and cheese which he had found with other eatables in a corner cupboard. And none too soon, for at that very moment the trap-door above opened, and Santa Claus' ruddy face

looked through. Another instant, and the Children's Saint was descending the ladder.

Ben had been careful to replace the toys as nearly as possible in the order he had found them, and Santa Claus evidently saw nothing wrong, for after a hasty glance he stepped over to the calendar. Here he stood stock still, and a puzzled, worried look overspread his usually merry countenance. Ben watched him closely, hardly daring to breathe; and he saw Santa Claus take a pair of iron-bowed spectacles from a shelf, wipe the glasses carefully, and again look at the calendar.

" Bless my soul! " he said at length.

"I'VE MISSED A WHOLE MONTH SOMEHOW."

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"How could I have made such a mistake? Nineteen hundred Christmases, and never the like before! I've missed a whole month somehow, and here, instead of the twenty-third of November, it's December twenty-third. It's all those dreadful measles. Bless my soul, bless my soul, whatever shall I do?" And the dear old Saint looked so disturbed and saddened that Ben's graceless heart gave a throb of sympathy, and its owner even began to be a little ashamed of the part he had taken.

"Well, well," went on Santa Claus briskly, "no good loitering here. I've got to do my best, that's all, and the

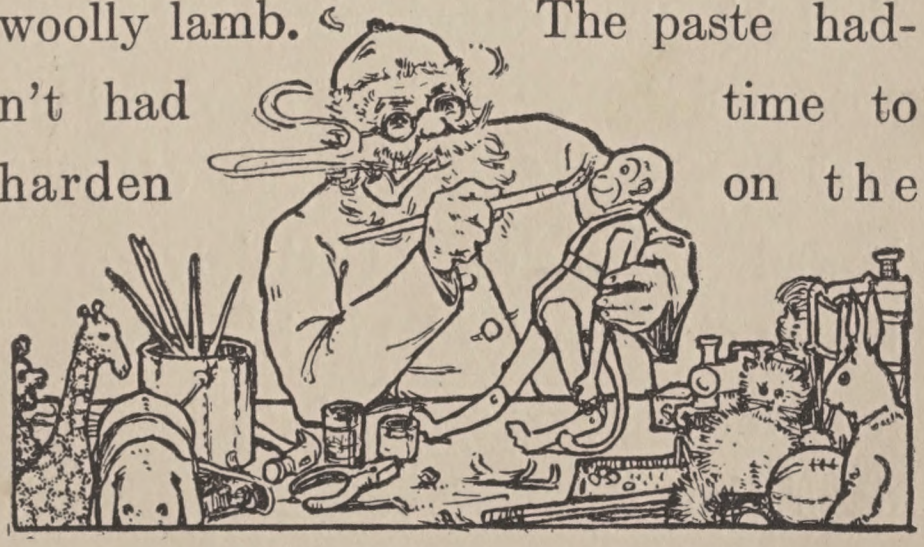
reindeer will have to do their best. To-morrow I'll pull that rope that sets the Christmas bells ringing for Christmas Eve, and I'll have to pack up as usual, and do all I can not to disappoint the children."

So saying, the dear old fellow trudged out into the snow to feed his reindeer; and Ben, watching his chance, snatched a hasty store of provisions for the day from the cupboard, and a bottle of water with which to quench his thirst.

In a few moments back came Santa Claus, and then began such a scene as the waiting boy had never before beheld. Hardly pausing for breath, Santa Claus worked at his toys, hammering,

painting, pasting; and at last Ben, worn out after his journey and his night's excitement, curled up and went to sleep. But there was no sleep for Santa Claus. All night long he toiled, and the dawn of the supposed twenty-fourth found him busily packing up for his annual journey.

The green paint came off a monkey he was putting in, and stuck all over a woolly lamb. The paste hadn't had time to harden on the



last lot of paper dolls, so that parts of their pretty tissue-paper dresses got rubbed off. In his haste Santa Claus strapped several wrong sizes of skates together, such as a No. 3 for one foot with a No. 5 for the other; and on consulting his list, he found, when it was too late to change things, that it was Tommy Jones that wanted the accordion, and not Sammy Smith, as he had thought. In another family Aunt Maria got a tool chest intended for her nephew, and he got a fine new pair of gold-bowed spectacles. Certainly some things did get mixed, but it was pretty hard for one pair of hands to do in two days' time the work of a whole month,

and even Santa Claus could not fix everything just as it should be. It was very sad, as it was, to see the dear old Saint try to make the toys go round; for of course there were some orders unfilled, and it nearly broke his heart to think of the thin stockings and sparely hung Christmas trees that must needs be the following morning. "If there's any one thing that I like better than another, it's a good fat stocking," he murmured, as he flung the last lot of Christmas gifts into his pack and turned to go out.

Ben got up and followed silently, keeping as much in the shadow as possible, and was able to slip into the

sleigh and conceal himself under the big fur robe without Santa Claus knowing anything about it. The night was clear and cold, the reindeer stamped their feet impatient to be gone, and the bells on the harness jingled as they moved. Santa Claus put the pack carefully into the sleigh, and then jumped in himself. One crack of the whip, and away they sped down the long avenue of evergreens, and straight on across the untrodden waste of snow.

CHAPTER III

To go back to every-day life and people: you can fancy for yourself the wonder felt by all when on what was supposed to be the twenty-fourth of November the Christmas bells began to ring. Of course, nobody thought for a moment that Santa Claus had made a mistake: that seemed clearly impossible, and in all the towns and throughout the country-side the people simply hurried and scurried, and racked their brains, and tried to make

the best of things and get ready, all in a moment as it were, for Christmas.

Ben would have been sorely disappointed at the success of his venture had he heard what people said, and how much disappointment instead of pleasure his thoughtless act had caused. He was to know soon enough, as you shall hear, but just now I want you to learn something of the distress and confusion that at once beset the land. It reached all classes of people, from the King, who was planning to give the Queen a surprise in the shape of a new crown, to little Sally in her garret chamber, patiently trying to finish a new pair of reins for her small brother.

Nobody had their gifts in readiness, — that is, but few did, — and even the cooks hadn't their mince-pies baked and their turkeys stuffed; nobody's house was hung with holiday wreaths, and none of the candy-shops had those fascinating barley animals or other sweet stuff that comes expressly for this one great feast of the year. The small boys were particularly angry, because they had lost Thanksgiving Day, and people went about with careworn and even cross faces, instead of the usual jolly Christmas Eve expression.

Christmas Day itself was hardly better. Santa Claus had done his best, as we know; but when he listened

down the chimney early in the morning, as was his invariable habit, he heard as many words of disappointment as he did cries of pleasure. Some small people even sobbed aloud, — for what little girl wants a jack-knife, and what boy of thirteen a woolly lamb that baas? Luckily Santa Claus' hair was white already, or all this trouble would have turned it so.

And what about Ben all this while? Still smuggled under the great fur robe in the sleigh, he peeped without being seen, as after each second trip to the housetops Santa Claus' face grew sadder and sadder, until at last, when the dear old Saint began to talk

UNDER THE GREAT FUR ROBE IN THE SLEIGH, HE PEEPED WITHOUT BEING SEEN. *Page* 44

to himself about the matter, and blame himself severely for losing a whole month by sheer carelessness and absence of mind, — for so he put it, — the boy could stand it no longer. With trembling fingers he threw aside the robe, and hardly noticing Santa Claus'

start of surprise, he plunged into the truthful recital of all that he had done, and never stopped till the whole story was out.

As he talked, the rosy face of his hearer grew grave, but it was evident too that Ben's manly confession of his naughtiness had not been lost on one who is ever the children's friend.

"Never has mortal boy before so much as seen my sleigh or the tip of a single reindeer's horn," said Santa Claus, after a moment's pause, when Ben at last had told his tale; "and think now what trouble and sorrow you have brought to trusting hearts all over this wide earth, and how many

little hands are empty through your fault. But you are sorry for your act, and you shall have a chance to make amends. The trouble you have caused me I forgive freely, but it is not mine to forgive you for spoiling the children's pleasure and the happiness of all who love Christmas. You must go to-night to the Snow Queen, and she shall decide your punishment. If you do her bidding well, on the real Christmas Eve, a month from hence, I will myself bring you back to your home, and leave you there a happy boy.

"As for these poor people so sadly cheated of their joy, I will, after you have gone to the Snow Queen, sprinkle

about in each household a magic powder, so that some shall never remember what has just happened, and those that do will think it all a dream. I will collect the toys and the other gifts I have just left, and the real Christmas on the right day will be, I hope, as bright and beautiful and glad as any I have ever seen.

"As for the Brownie who led you into all this trouble, he must pay the penalty. He shall go to prison for a year, — a Jack-in-the-box he shall be, — and I hope the chance to be silent and to think will make him less ready for mischief." So saying, Santa Claus again turned his reindeer's heads to

the North, and at the word of command they sped homeward.

Ben did not know what lay before him, but in spite of his fears his heart was lighter than it had been on the journey down, for he felt that at last he had done the right thing, and that Santa Claus would not let the Snow Queen give him any task above his strength.

After leaving the thickly settled districts and on through outlying hamlets, the reindeer took that wonderful pace that is at once so even and so swift, and which enables their master to visit all those thousands of firesides before cock-crow every Christmas

morn; but when they reached the avenue of evergreens that led to Santa Claus' home, they did not slacken their speed, for they had still some miles to go toward the frozen North, where the wonderful palace of the Snow Queen was standing.

Ben could now see its frosty towers and sparkling roof in the distance, and at last tall gates of ice barred their way. The sleigh stopped. Ben had hardly time to gaze upon the curious forms of men, animals, and flowers that decorated the massive structure, when sentinels clad in dazzling armor swung wide the fretted doors, and bowing low, received the command

with which Santa Claus gave up his captive to their keeping. Without a word Ben too was clad from head to foot in a shining snow-white suit, for without such protection he would have perished, slain by the first icy breath from the Snow Queen's domain.

Santa Claus bade him farewell, the reindeer started, and after one wistful glance, Ben followed his silent guards through the gates, and they closed heavily behind him.

Under a long line of frozen arches, hung with lamps in which a blue light burned, the boy was led, and so on and on, up the great ice stairs of the Palace, through silent white

halls, and at last into the presence of the Queen.

The royal lady was clad in dazzling white, and the gaze of her cold blue eyes seemed to pierce Ben through and through. He saw, as if in a dream, her glittering diamond crown; the snowy veil that covered her hair, dark as a storm cloud; the wonderful throne of carved ice upon which she sat; the columns covered with beautiful and strange frost tracery, that held up the ceiling of the great Hall; the motionless rows of maids and men-at-arms: all, all in white like their dread mistress.

Then the Snow Queen spoke, and her voice made him think of falling

HER VOICE MADE HIM THINK OF FALLING ICICLES.

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icicles, and of the miles and miles of frozen, barren country over which he had just come. It made his very blood, too, run chill and slow in his veins; and it was with a sigh of relief that he obeyed the silent wave of her hand, commanding him to follow the waiting guard, and so to his first task.

This time the scene changed. The country all about was still cold and bound with the iron grip of never-ending Winter; but at a little distance the boy saw a snow hut, with openings for doors and windows, and much like the huts Ben used to build at home, only many times larger.

"Here," said the guide, speaking

for the first time, " here is the home of the Great-Grandmother of the Polar Bears. You must obey her as you would the Snow Queen herself. On your faithfulness much depends."

They reached, as he spoke, the door of the hut. " My Sovereign sends this boy," he said through the opening, pushing Ben within as he spoke. " His life is under the royal protection, but his services are yours to do with as you wish. When the moon changes, I will call for him and bring to my mistress the report of his conduct."

From the glare without to the half darkness within was such a change that for a moment Ben could see little but

a tumbling mass of white that rolled about on the floor of the hut. His ears, however, were greeted instantly with a sharp chorus of yelps and growls, and he shrank back, not knowing what was to come next. But a gruff voice bade him draw nearer, and he was now able to see that the squirming thing at his feet was really three or four little Bears, rolling over and over, and biting and cuffing one another, half in frolic and half in anger. The yelps and growls came from them, but the big voice of command proceeded from an immense yellow-white She-Bear, who reclined on a block of ice at one side of the hut.

CHAPTER IV

And now began such a life as Ben had never even faintly imagined. He was, to all intents and purposes, to play nurse to four quarrelsome young Bears, and to please as best he could their cross old Great-Grandmother, who, in her way, was even harder to suit than the youngsters.

"Bluff," the eldest of the three brothers, was fond of being pushed about on a cake of ice on the unfrozen water near the hut, and it was lucky Ben was a strong boy for his age, for

it was no light task, shoving around a young Bear of this size, as I can tell you.

"Tough," the second brother, was always fighting, and had to be continually pulled out of trouble by the tip of his tail; and this, too, was no easy matter.

"Squealeow," their baby sister, was forever whining, no matter how hard Ben tried to please her; and perhaps, after all, she was the one who had most to do with changing the boy for the better, for Ben soon got so sick and tired of hearing her grumble that he made up his mind never again to do the same himself.

There remained but one other little Bear, and he was called "Grip;" and a good name it was for him, for he was so selfish that he always managed to get the largest piece of blubber at meals, and was always trying to turn his brothers and sisters out of the coldest corner at night.

As for the Great-Grandmother, she was very particular about her coat, and the thing that Ben disliked most of all was to stand by the hour and comb out the snarls that would get, for all his pains, in her long yellow-white fur.

He learned a number of things here, however, that were amazingly useful

afterward. For one thing, to mind when he was first spoken to; and for another, not to answer back; for the old She-Bear was as ready with her paw as with her tongue, and Ben was often knocked off his feet, end over end, head first into the snow. It didn't hurt particularly, but it was very disagreeable, and he soon found that the Great-Grandmother of the Bears was far more likely to keep *her* temper when he succeeded in keeping *his;* and after that things went more smoothly.

But one day poor Ben really had a dreadfully hard time. It wasn't his fault either, but I suppose in by-gone

days, when he had been at home, he had often blamed people for things they couldn't help, and this might have been part of the lesson he was so painfully and slowly learning.

At any rate it began with the Bears having a picnic. I think there are some words that are just as nice as they can be. *Christmas* is one and *candy* is another, and *presents* and *vacation* and a lot more, and I do think

picnic is a very nice word too. Ben used to, but he doesn't now. In fact he can't bear it. I didn't mean to make that kind of a joke, but I'll leave it in, for it is the way Ben has felt ever since that day with Bluff, Tough, Squealeow and Grip. The plan was for all five to take lunch, some blubber pie, and seal cutlet, and minced walrus and frozen fish cakes and other such dainties that the bears love and that Ben hated, and go to a certain ice pack where there was good cold water bathing in holes and fishing and snow sliding. The great She-Bear was about to have one of her left over naps. She slept most of the winter anyway, but

she always kept a few days for any extra sleeping she might wish to do, and now that Ben was at hand to take care of her grandchildren, she was very well pleased to turn them over to him.

Ben had been sub on a scrub freshman football eleven and it helped him now, for his four charges were pretty big and as troublesome and rough as you can imagine. He didn't enjoy the idea of a whole day alone with the four in the open, but there was no help for it, and he had to shoulder the heavy basket filled with polar bear food and trudge along after his squealing, quarrelsome quartet. They began almost before they had left the snow hut, to

make him trouble, and before they reached the picnic grounds, which, by the way, were very near the big North Pole itself, Ben was heartily tired of the whole party.

The North Pole had been painted, one day lately, by Santa Claus. It was red, white and blue, for Santa Claus had said he was sure an American would be the first to find it and he thought it would be nice for the explorer to see his own country's colors after such a long, hard trip. The children's Saint is always thinking of kind things to do like that. Anyway the paint was fresh, and there were some shingles lying round where Santa

Claus had used some new props to steady the big pole itself.

The four bears were very destructive, and they got into that paint the very first thing and smeared it and got it all over themselves, besides spoiling the looks of the pole itself. It made Ben angry because it was such a silly thing to do, and he knew it would make Santa Claus feel badly to see how careless the four bears had been, and Ben knew, too, it would take a very long time to shampoo those paint marks out of the bears' white fur. And the great Bear Grandmother was *so* particular. That is the way they began, and they went from bad to worse.

Squealeow whined all the time, that is, when she wasn't telling tales on the others, and Tough and Bluff said hardly anything to each other but "Shut up," "I won't," "You mean old thing," and had such bad manners generally that Ben was disgusted. It made him very red in the face to remember that he used to talk that way a good deal himself not so very long ago, but then he hadn't had to listen for many icy hours to two polar bears doing it, while he himself was trying to keep warm and keep the peace as well, all the while sitting or standing about on a cold, cold ice pack with nobody to give him any help or comfort whatsoever. Pic-

nic! A nice picnic that was and Ben was glad when lunch time came, for it showed that the short arctic day would be the sooner over.

Lunch time! But do you know what happened then?

Ben had put the basket down on a big block of ice not very far away, and he had been too busy since to notice it. Grip had been very quiet, oh, yes, very, very quiet! He had soon strolled away by himself, after the arrival of the five at the playgrounds, and when Ben lifted up the cover of the basket he knew the reason why.

The basket was there all safe enough, but the lunch!

Three small polar bears gave one look, and then three very big squeals of rage and grief rent the air. For there was no lunch at all. Only a few crumbs were left, and some of these were sticking to Grip's whiskers.

And Grip was very fat. His stomach was as round as a balloon, and he didn't in the least seem to mind the fact that the basket was empty.

On the contrary he did the most aggravating thing he could think of. He just sat on his tail and whistled!

Fancy! Two whole blubber pies, six large seal cutlets, four minced walrus rolls, one dozen frozen fish cakes! Ben knew for a fact that the

great She-Bear had put all that in the basket, and now — No wonder Grip was fat. The real wonder was he didn't burst. I should think he would have wanted to run at least, but of course after a meal like that he simply couldn't run if he did want to, and I believe that besides being so selfish and greedy he liked to make his two brothers and sister feel bad.

There aren't many polar bears as naughty as that, but I have been told that Grip was the very worst of that family.

Nobody did anything for a moment, and then Squealeow, who liked blubber pie better than anything in the whole

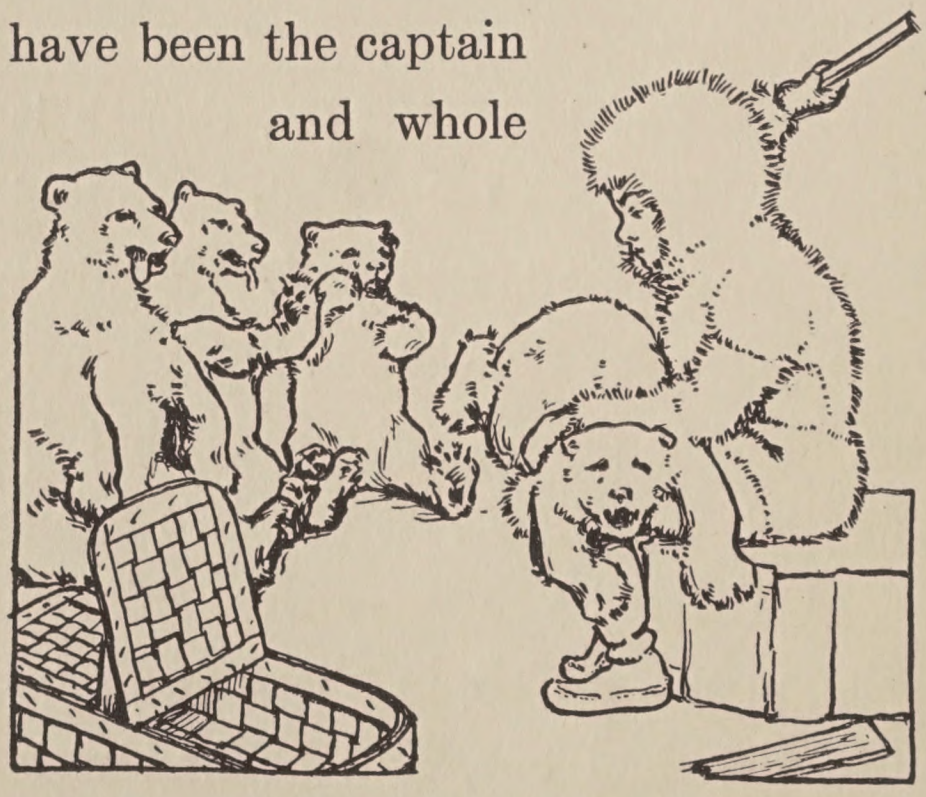
arctic circle, rushed at her brother and cuffed him. It wasn't a very big cuff, because she was the smallest of them all, but what do you think Grip did?

I'm going to put it in big letters. It is so perfectly dreadful.

HE BIT A PIECE OUT OF HER EAR.

There, you know it now, though it is so bad perhaps I shouldn't have told you. And it made Ben mad. He didn't care much for Squealeow, but when a big brother does a thing like that to his little sister he just couldn't stand it. Did I tell you there were shingles lying about? Well, in about two minutes Ben had one, and he had Grip

over his knees, and, well, Grip had the surprise of his life. It isn't nice to be spanked even if you have on a thick fur suit, and Ben was strong. Did I tell you, too, that he had played sub on a scrub freshman eleven? Well, Grip thought Ben strong enough to have been the captain and whole



eleven. Oh, how Grip squealed! All the other bears sat with their mouths wide open and their tongues hanging out. They admired Ben very much, but their brother's cries were being carried to the snow hut where the Bears' Great-Grandmother lived. She stirred uneasily in her sleep, then she sneezed, then she sat up and listened. Then she gave one great bound out of the hut.

Ben saw her coming. She was going as fast as an express train and her eyes looked like two green automobile lamps, so Ben thought he had better drop Grip and the shingle. It didn't matter so very much, for the shingle had broken, anyway.

There might not be any more to this story, but just as she reached him a soldier of the Snow Queen turned the corner. He had seen the whole thing from behind the end of an iceberg, and he made the big She-Bear stop.

He explained it all to her, and when she saw Squealeow's torn ear she forgave Ben at once. The little bear was her favorite polar grandchild, and she just said a few words to Grip. She told him she didn't feel the need of any shingle, but she said she thought she should have use for her paw when they got home.

Grip didn't dare even to squeal. His grandmother led him into the snow

hut by the ear and the rest all waited outside.

There isn't anything more to say except that he never in his life bit anybody again. I don't think he ever even wanted to.

That was the end of the famous picnic. Of course Ben had a number of other trying times with the Bear family, but none as bad as that. The four youngsters were now all a little afraid of him, and with some kinds of bears this isn't a bad thing. The great She-Bear saw too after a while that Ben was trying hard to do his best and to be pleasant and obedient and fair. She never really liked him, because it

wasn't in her nature to like any boy, but she disliked him much less than she had thought possible. She showed it by seeing that Ben got his share of the fattest bits of blubber at meal times, and things like that. It was pretty hard on Ben, for he would much rather have gone hungry, but he saw she meant well, so he tried to eat what she gave him without any fuss. When you remember how disagreeable he used to be at home only a short time before when there was only one kind of pudding and no ice-cream for dessert, you will, I am sure, agree with me that Ben was very much improved indeed.

He was not sorry, however, I can tell you, when the moon changed, and the guard, having received a pretty good report of his conduct, led him once more into the presence of the Snow Queen.

Her Majesty looked him over with a little more interest, Ben thought, than she had shown before.

"I have a great mind to put him into Mother Nature's workshop," she said. "My friend Sir Santa Claus tells me this mortal boy was very destructive while at home," Ben hung his head, "so perhaps it would be a wise thing to let him mend a few broken things and help Mother Nature,

who is quite overworked as it is, poor dear. There is always enough to do, and some of her people are so careless. North Wind blew the tree tops all over the place the other day, she told me, and rooted up I don't know how many young spring plants. A bulb isn't safe a minute when that North Wind begins to frolic. He never knows enough to stop. Just like some boys," the Queen added.

Ben had learned enough by this time not to interrupt or contradict a Queen; in fact there are few royal personages who can stand anything of the kind for a moment. He knew, too, that they had a sudden way of stopping an argument by simply saying: "Off

with his head!" and that generally settled the question. Ben rather wanted to keep his head, and besides, he felt with shame that perhaps there was some truth in her Majesty's remarks. There were a good many broken toys and other things as well that could witness against him, so probably Ben followed the wisest plan after all when he let the Queen do all the talking.

Besides that, anything, he felt, would be an improvement over his late task. He never wanted to see a bear again as long as he lived; and he had always rather liked sloyd in school. Would Mother Nature's workshop be anything like that, he wondered?

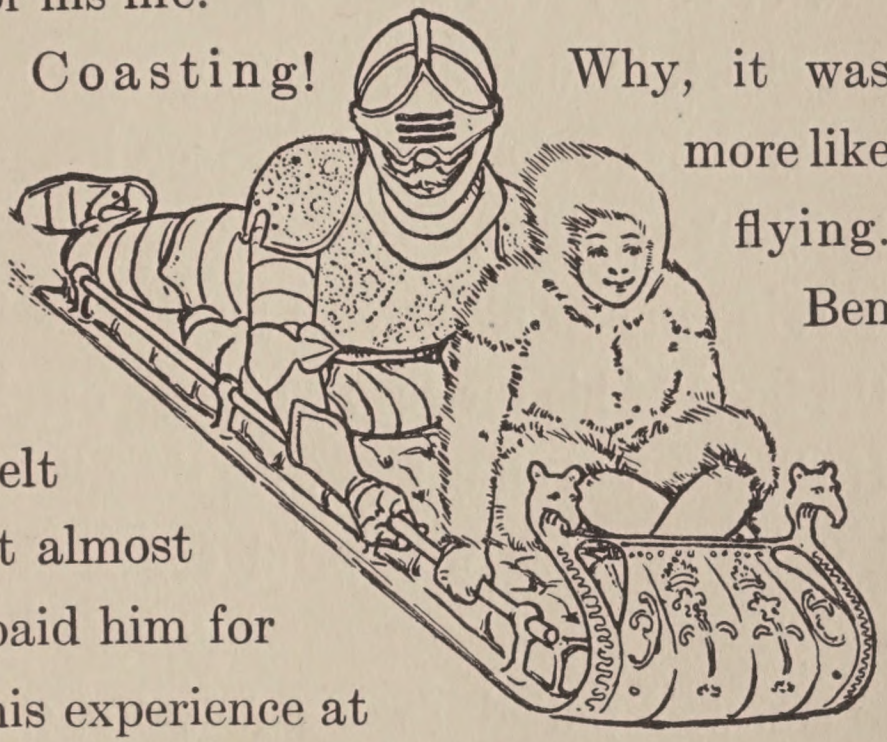
Meanwhile the Queen had ceased and all the courtiers had also stopped saying "How true!" "How wise!" "How delightfully spoken!" such murmurs always following as a matter of course any remark whatsoever of their royal mistress.

Her Majesty meanwhile had beckoned to a soldier and given him her commands.

Ben bowed low,—he had learned that this was expected also,—and then he found himself in a few moments outside the Palace.

The guard motioned him to seat himself on a toboggan richly gilded and decorated with the Queen's colors,

that was waiting for them at the top of a steep hill near at hand. Another instant and Ben was having the ride of his life.



Coasting! Why, it was more like flying. Ben felt it almost paid him for his experience at that dreadful picnic, and it was simply wonderful the way they took the curves. If only the boys at school could see him.

Faster and faster! Up one slope and down another and over some of the most jouncey jounces you ever saw or could even imagine. It was all too short, though they must have come many miles before the toboggan began to slacken its speed. The air was growing milder also. Ben pushed back the hood of his fur coat with one hand. He had still to cling fast with the other, but by now his wonderful coast was over.

He was pulled to his feet by the guard, who motioned him to pile his warm mittens, fur boots, coat and hood on the ground beside him, ground on which there was no longer ice or

snow, but tiny spears of green growing grass.

A huge unpainted building stretched its long length before them. From it came the sound of busy work. Hammers were evidently in use within, and saws, and the whir of some great wheel.

Ben looked with all his eyes, and as he did so, the door opened, and out hobbled an old woman. Ben thought she must at least have been a hundred, but he flattered her. She was many many hundreds of years old.

No wonder she was wrinkled and brown and bent. But she was amazingly spry for all that and her little blue eyes were sharper than any gimlet.

They seemed to look right through Ben, way to his backbone, and the Ice Queen's soldier straightened up, and saluted, as though in the presence of his own dread mistress.

"Well," said the old lady, coming toward them, "Noah's dove came in, and dropped her olive branch long enough to say that the Ice Queen had sent me a helper — Goodness knows we need one. In the last few thousand years I've been Mother Nature's housekeeper, I've never seen things so at sixes and sevens. The poor dear has so much on her mind she forgot she let a baby earthquake loose without any directions, and my! the damage

that was done! You wouldn't believe it. Mother Nature cried and cried and quite flooded one part of the country, and then in the confusion the seasons got changed about, and summer wasn't properly mixed. It's going to be much too hot some days, and much too cold some others right near together, though I've done my best to fix things.

"And the Earth people are so particular and hard to suit. They don't at all realize that housekeeping isn't so easy even with all my experience."

She fixed her sharp little eyes on Ben.

"I suppose you've heard the verse," she went on;

"'A man's a fool as a rule
When it's hot he wants it cool
When it's cool he wants it hot
Always wanting what it's not.'

"There, that to my mind's the most sensible poetry I ever read." She turned briskly to the soldier.

"Come, come," she said, "don't stand talking here; there's a great deal to be done, as I've told you, and I never had a mortal boy before for a helper. Tell the Ice Queen he's safe with me and that I'll do my best with him, and now good-bye."

She walked toward the house and Ben followed.

" What experience have you ever had with snails? " she asked.

Ben stared.

" Dear, dear, that's a pity," went on Mother Nature's housekeeper without waiting for more of an answer. " We're terribly behind hand on revarnishing snails' shells, and they *are* so slow about their appointments. I've waited a whole week for one whose house needed attention the worst way.

" You know, I suppose, they carry their houses with them? "

" Yes," said Ben, " I know that."

" And that's what makes it so hard. For we've a fine express service and if Mr. Snail could only stay at home

and let us call for his house, we would have the work done, and over with, in the time it takes him to begin to get ready. I've spent a good many hours arguing with Mother Nature. But, poor dear, she is so set in her ways. It's an old-fashioned notion of hers to have the snail and his house go together, and there it is. However, she may change her mind. From something she said I shouldn't be surprised if that were different in a few thousand years or so."

Ben gasped, but the old lady went on without noticing. They were in the house now, but Mother Nature's housekeeper was still talking. "Yes,"

she said proudly, " it was entirely my idea, having the lobsters and crabs grow on another claw themselves, if anything happened to the one they had at first. Self-help! that's my motto, and I wish more of the creatures had it.

" Well, what's the trouble now? " she questioned, for a little elf in green and brown with an anxious face had come hurrying up to them.

" Please, Dame Careful," he said, " Parsnips upset the grass stain all over the pinks, and we've rubbed and scrubbed but it only makes them streaky. It wasn't a very big lot though — "

"Now whatever shall I do?" said Mother Nature's housekeeper in despair. "That's the very last pot of pinks in the place. Their edges were too ragged and they were sent in to be trimmed, and now see what's happened. Whoever

heard of a green pink? The repair shop will be disgraced. Where's that good-for-nothing Parsnip? "

" Please, ma'am, he's hiding. He got into a century plant and he won't come out, and it isn't due to open itself for ninety-nine more years," answered the elf.

" My senses! " exclaimed the housekeeper, looking about as though in search of an idea.

" Please," said Ben, who had suddenly remembered having heard his father talking about a flower show, " I've been told that where I came from, a green pink would be worth a lot of money. They try to make pond lilies

blue and other colors, I know, and isn't there somebody who's poor you could send the green pinks to? "

"The very thing," said Dame Careful in great delight. "I knew you were a bright boy the minute I set eyes on you. I'll send those pinks to that little lame girl, that Mother Nature told me about. Perhaps she'll get money enough for them to get a real doctor who can cure her. They've left her quite alone to Mother Nature so far, but she, poor dear, isn't really up with the times in these cases, and I've heard her say that little girl was a darling. Well, I am pleased, but Parsnips will get his ears boxed all

the same, if I do have to wait ninety-nine years to do it."

So saying, Dame Careful led the way into the very heart of the wonderful repair shop, and it was plain she had taken a great fancy to Ben, for she took pains to explain all he saw, and finally ended by giving him the most interesting work of all. It was that of manager of the painting department, where everything was done, from retinting the clouds pink, and gold, and lavender, and even fiery crimson, to touching up butterflies' wings with the most gorgeous colors.

A white robin that had somehow escaped was brought to him to start

with, and Ben studied his nature book with its colored pictures so carefully that he succeeded in turning out a first class robin that nobody need have been ashamed of.

This then was the beginning, as I have said, and in that strange and interesting place the days went swiftly by. Of course it wasn't always exactly as he liked it. The butterflies were careless, some of them, about keeping their appointments; and the glowworms and fireflies *would* use up the batteries that made them light up just fooling around and not tending to business, as they should, and this almost as fast as one could fix them.

It was also hard to make a wiggly garter snake hold still long enough to be repainted, and the bees would mislay their stings.

Still, Ben felt on the whole that it was a good deal more fun to mend things than to break them. He never was able to tell very much about it, though he met the most remarkable people. Jack Frost, who tinted leaves and made wonderful ice pictures, was one person whose acquaintance he made and one who promised to come and see Ben at home.

"I'll pinch your nose some fine day," laughed Jack, "and remind you of old times here."

Ben found that everybody spoke with the greatest love and respect of Santa Claus. "He's the very kindest person in all fairy land," they said, and every time he was mentioned Ben's cheeks burned at the thought of the mean trick he had played on the children's friend.

However, he was doing all he could to make up for it now, and he worked hard and faithfully.

Dame Careful trusted him more and more, and she almost wept when the time drew near to say good-bye.

Ben was half sorry too, though he was so anxious to get through his punishment and be home once more,

that nothing, however strange and exciting, could have tempted him to stay longer than need be.

All this time he never saw Mother Nature once though he heard her spoken of constantly. He didn't even know where she lived. Dame Careful shook her head at him when he asked her, but one day he heard her murmur to herself, over a lot of broken material in the repair shop, "Wasteful, careless Mother Nature, but poor dear, she's so busy, and what after all should we do without her?" and that was the most that Ben learned of the great Mother.

But the time to go, as I have said,

at length arrived, and with words of the very highest praise of his conduct, Dame Careful turned him over to the same soldier of the Ice Queen who had brought him thither.

This time his task was to bring a perfect diamond necklace to his royal mistress, and he was told how to do so, led to the proper place, and there left alone.

"On Christmas Eve I will seek you here," said the guard, "and if your task is finished, you will be set without the gates and free once more. Should you fail, another year awaits you within the Snow Queen's Kingdom."

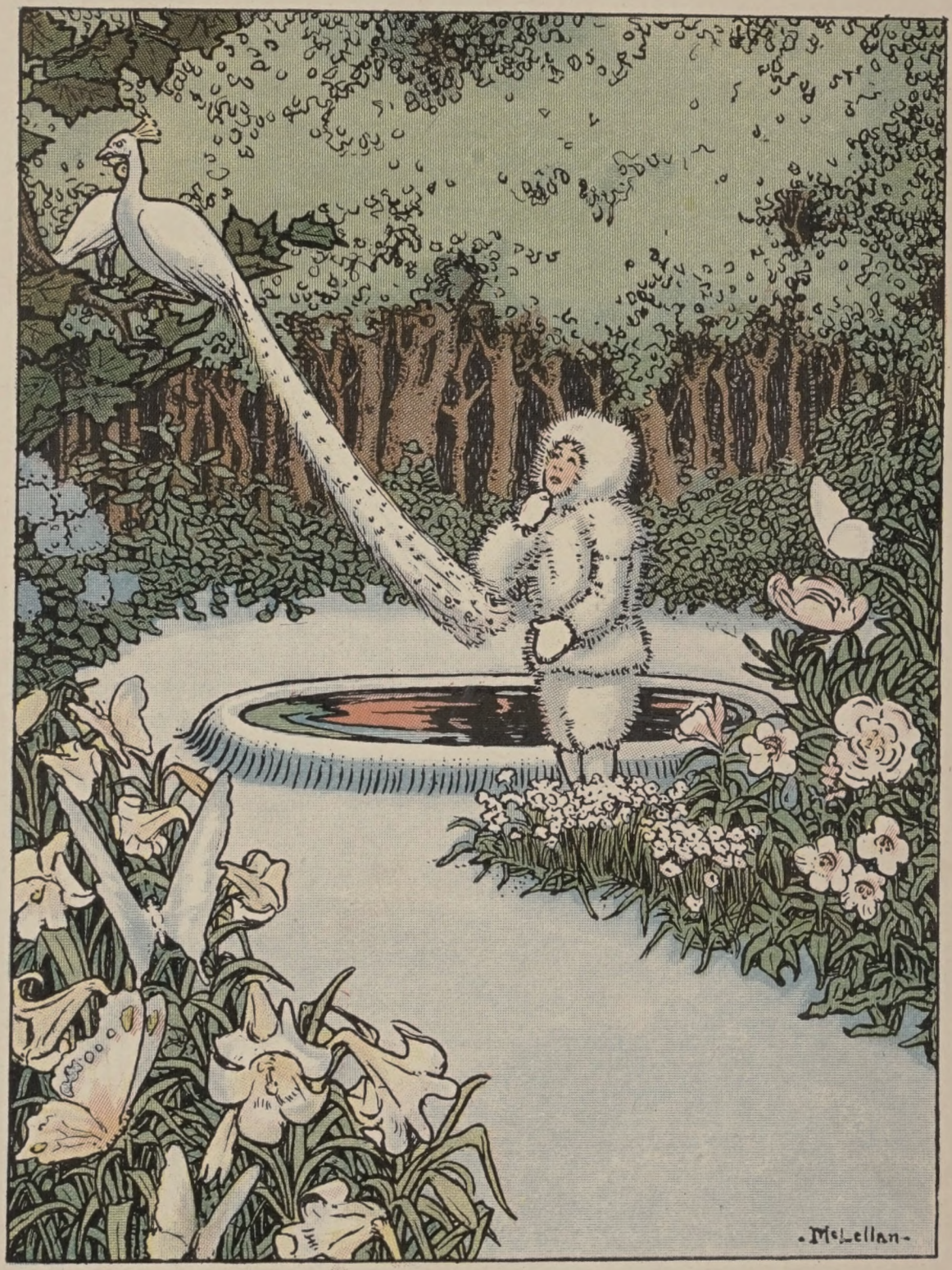
Ben now found himself in the royal

garden, and the sight that met his eyes was more strange and beautiful than anything he had yet seen. Everything here, as elsewhere, was white, but with a soft, shimmering whiteness, quite unlike the cold, steely glitter of the Palace.

Out of the pure snow that lined the garden walk grew countless beautiful flowers: stately lilies and white roses; and in one special bed, a clump of priceless edelweiss. It was these blossoms that he was to watch with patience, for at midnight a single drop of dew would fall into the flower's heart; at that instant the Northern Lights would flash, and their shimmering

glory be imprisoned within the drop of dew. Then it was Ben's task to pluck the flower, and if he did so at the right moment, the drop in its centre would harden and turn into a perfect diamond. This would happen for twelve nights, and Ben knew he must be constant and not fail to tend all the Queen's flowers carefully, especially the edelweiss, so that the white blossoms would stand upright on their stems and not droop from lack of care.

Great birds with snowy plumage preened their feathers on the ice-bound branches of the trees in the garden, and butterflies with silvery wings



BEN FOUND THE GARDEN VERY LONELY.

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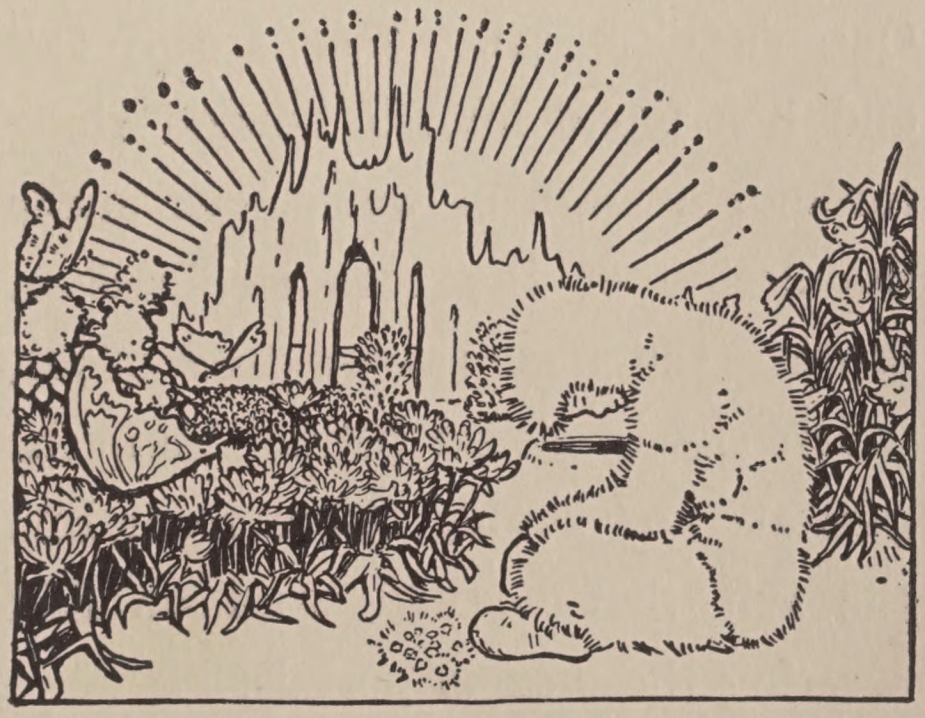
floated from flower to flower; and when night came, the moon rose high in the heavens, and the stars blazed with a glory unknown to other climes.

In its way, this work was as hard as the other, for here the silence was unbroken, and for all its loveliness Ben found the garden very, very lonely. He was tired, too, though not hungry, for in the Snow Queen's Kingdom people rarely need to eat; but Ben did want to sleep, and yet he dared not, at least until every task was done and the midnight hour had struck, when the weary lad would pillow his head upon the snow and snatch a few hours' longed-for rest.

Eleven nights had come and gone, and eleven perfect diamonds had crowned his work. But one more was needed, and then home! How his heart ached at the word; how much he wanted his mother's arms, and how he wished for his father's voice and the merry voices of his brothers and sister! And his little white bed — I'm afraid it was thinking of that which made poor Ben's eyes so strangely heavy. At any rate, the silver chimes in the royal tower pealed once and again without the gardener's knowledge. Ten o'clock, eleven o'clock — Ben heard them not, for he was fast asleep. Swift and sure came the mid-

night hour. "One! two! three! four!" pealed the bells, and the Northern Lights flashed in the heavens. "Five! six! seven! eight!" One bright ray struck sharp on the boy's closed eyelids. "Nine! ten!" Ben opened his bewildered eyes and sat



up. "Eleven! twelve!" — but at the last stroke his hand closed as by instinct over the last unplucked edelweiss, and the twelfth diamond rolled upon the ground at his feet.

At the same moment the voice of the guard rang in his ears: "Twelve perfect stones! Well done. I bring the Queen's dismissal. You are free;" and Ben found himself hurried along through a maze of walks, out under the arches of the entrance, and so through the great carved gates of ice, which slowly closed behind him, the man-at-arms having taken from him the suit that he had worn on first entering those same portals.

He was alone, quite alone, with the Snow Queen's Kingdom at his back, and before him hundreds of miles of ice-bound country. His heart sank. Had Santa Claus forgotten him? Was he to be left to perish thus, just as he had earned forgiveness for his fault?

But now, as if in answer to the thought, a tiny mouse-like train appeared in the distance, and the faint sound of bells was borne upon the air. Swiftly the sleigh approached, and in a brief space Santa Claus had caught the shivering boy in his arms, had tucked him well up under the big fur robe, and saying, "I go to-night, my brave Ben, to your home first," had

turned the willing reindeer in that direction.

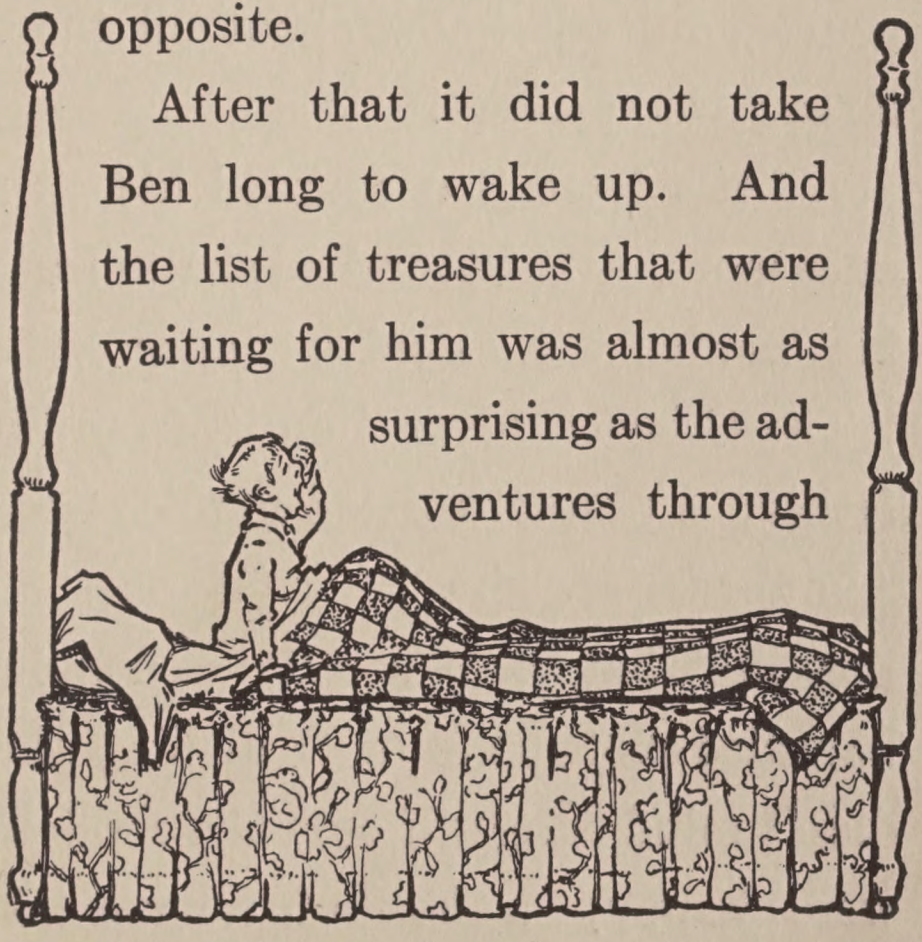
Again the boy's lids were heavy, and now there was naught for which he must waken. He felt safe and warm and happy, and the sleigh-bells kept saying in a delightful jingle, "Home again, home again," and by and by, "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas."

He opened his eyes and rubbed them.

"Well, of all the sleepy boys!" said his mother's voice; and there he was, safe and sound in his four-post bed, while about him danced his brothers and sister, each with a fat stock-

ing clasped tight in their hands; while his father in dressing-gown and slippers, and rather sleepy though still smiling, stood pointing to a similar stocking that hung from the fireplace opposite.

After that it did not take Ben long to wake up. And the list of treasures that were waiting for him was almost as surprising as the adventures through



which he had just passed; and the grateful joy with which he received them, without one single word of fault-finding, was more wonderful yet to his father and mother, who, of course, did not know about all these strange happenings.

A little later Ben counted his gifts once more, — the promised skates from his mother; a double-runner with "The Crimson Flyer" on it, from his father; a purple worsted muffler from Aunt Maria, who believed only in presents that were useful; a double-barrelled shot gun from Uncle Will, who didn't mind danger if only the children were happy; a box of home-made

taffy from Sister Mary; a bank and a book from his two brothers.

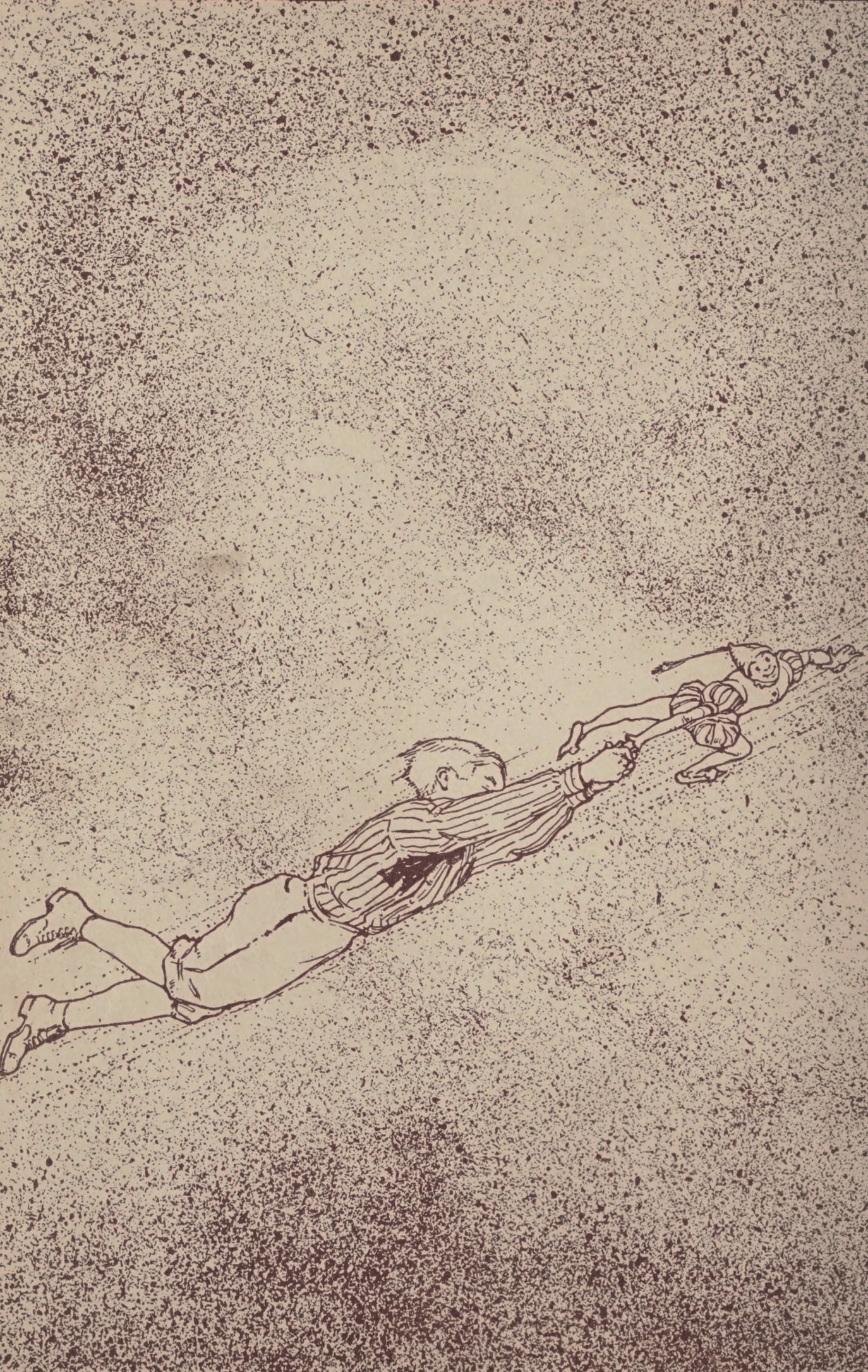
Yes; and what was that at the very toe of his stocking? Ben held it up to the wondering eyes of his family: a jack-knife, — the most complete thing of its kind, with two blades, a corkscrew, a pair of scissors, and a gimlet, and attached to it a piece of paper, on which was written —

"With the Compliments of Santa Claus."

"A joke of Uncle Will's," said his father, laughing; but Ben knew better.

THE END.

SEP 26 1912



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